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\$7 Million Trump Building Condo Tied to Scandal-Scarred Foreign Leader - The New York Times

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By Jesse Drucker

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The Trump International Hotel and Tower in Manhattan, near the southwest corner of Central Park, is a 44-story building with a mix of luxury condominiums and hotel suites that go for more than \$2,500 a night.

Unit 32G, a two-bedroom, 1,767-square-foot apartment with sweeping views of the park, is owned by an entity called Ecree, which bought the condo in 2014 for \$7 million in cash.

Documents unearthed by the nonprofit group Global Witness show that the purchase was funded by the daughter of the Republic of Congo's president, a longtime target of anti-corruption investigators. The funds for the all-cash purchase appear to have been siphoned from that country's government, according to a report by Global Witness.

The purchase took place more than two years before Donald J. Trump became president. Owners of units in the building — 1 Central Park West — pay tens of thousands of dollars a year in condo fees to Mr. Trump's company, the Trump Organization.

A spokeswoman for the Trump Organization, Kimberly Benza, said that Unit 32G had not recently been owned by the Trump Organization and that whoever bought it in 2014 purchased it from an unrelated party. She said the condo fees were for building-maintenance purposes "and are not fees paid to Trump for profit."

There is no indication that Mr. Trump or his company broke the law. Less than two years after the condo sale, federal regulators started requiring greater disclosures of purchases of certain high-end New York properties.

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The Republic of the Congo's president, Denis Sassou Nguesso, and his wife, Antoinette, in Paris last year. Benoit Tessier/Reuters

Mr. Trump's properties, which he and his family continue to operate, have a long history of serving as home to people with checkered pasts. David Bogatin, a Russian mobster, and Jean-Claude Duvalier, the Haitian dictator known as Baby Doc, both owned units in Trump Tower, the president's flagship property on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue. Felix Sater, a felon and former business associate of Mr. Trump's, formerly had his office in that tower.

Denis Sassou-Nguesso, the president of the Republic of Congo, is one of the world's longest-sitting heads of state, having been in office for the past 22 years. For roughly a decade, he and his family have been the subject of corruption investigations in France. Authorities there have identified more than 60 million euros of luxury goods and real estate that the Sassou-Nguesso family owns in France. The country was a French colony until 1960.

The Global Witness report alleges that a Cyprus company belonging to the president's daughter, Claudia Sassou-Nguesso, bankrolled the purchase of the Trump apartment in July 2014. (The Portuguese newspaper Expresso has previously reported on aspects of the purchase and its connection to the daughter of the president of the Republic of Congo.)

A spokesman for President Sassou-Nguesso and a representative at the Republic of Congo's embassy in Washington did not respond to requests for comment.

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Global Witness — which is funded in part by the billionaire George Soros’s foundation — followed a money trail that began with a Brazilian company receiving a series of lucrative public contracts from the Republic of Congo’s government. Money from one of those contracts wound up in the bank account of a company in Cyprus, according to the report. Ownership of the company was transferred to Ms. Sassou-Nguesso in July 2013.

In January 2014, the Cyprus company received nearly \$20 million, apparently in Republic of Congo taxpayer funds, through a contract with the country’s government, according to a Portuguese police report reviewed by Global Witness. Six months later, the Cyprus company paid for Unit 32G in the Trump building on Columbus Circle.

A 2006 real estate listing for the corner apartment shows floor-to-ceiling windows with northern and western views, a bathroom with pink marble walls and golden fixtures and “capacious closets.” The building is outfitted with a spa, swimming pool and 24-hour food service.

Claudia Sassou-Nguesso, the daughter of the president of the Republic of Congo, in 2012.
Guy Gervais Kitina/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Letters cited by Global Witness and reviewed by The New York Times show that a Portuguese businessman, José Veiga, wrote reference letters on behalf of the president’s granddaughter to the condo association ahead of the sale. He called her “one of my best friends” and said she would be a “valued addition” to the Trump property.

It is unclear what sort of background check, if any, the Trump Organization did on the purchase financed by Ms. Sassou-Nguesso.

A lawyer for Mr. Veiga, who Portuguese authorities have arrested on suspicion of money laundering, declined to comment.

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According to New York real estate records, the entity used to make the purchase, Ecree, used a Manhattan address at the law firm K&L Gates.

Unlike banks and other financial institutions, United States real estate developers have typically not been subject to rules that require they vet the backgrounds or sources of money of prospective buyers, including looking out for potential money laundering.

In 2016, in the wake of a series of Times articles on the suspicious funds behind luxury real estate purchases around the country, the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, part of the Treasury Department, started requiring title companies to report all-cash purchases of some expensive residential properties in Manhattan and Miami.

Global Witness called on the Trump Organization to clarify whether it was continuing to receive maintenance fees on Unit 32G, “as there is a risk that these companies may be currently enabling money laundering of public funds embezzled by the Congolese president’s daughter and benefitting from those illicit funds.”

Peter Jones, one of the authors of the report, called on the Justice Department to join French law enforcement and consider seizing the apartment because it appeared to have been purchased with embezzled money.

Kitty Bennett contributed research.

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